

Scott. Virgil. Gordon. Alan. And . . . and the other one, whatsisname. The most famous family of the sixties are now the cult heroes of the eighties. Allan Bryce chats to the man who created the Thunderbird legend, Gerry Anderson.

Gerry Anderson

The first thing I noticed when I entered Gerry Anderson's office at Bray Studios, just outside Windsor, was that two foot tall model of courtesy, Parker. He looked as though he might spring to life at any moment and rush off to fetch Lady Penelope's pink Rolls Royce. But with nobody to pull his strings he didn't even bother to take my coat, and instead sat contentedly in his glass case while his creator poured us both a cup of coffee and settled down to discuss how he became the Geppeto of the small screen.

Gerry Anderson is a softly spoken, balding Englishman in his mid fifties who within the last thirty years has turned puppetry into a fine art. But ironically it was not a subject he chose to get involved with in the first place: 'I started off in the industry as a technician' he told me, 'and after some years I decided I would like to make my own pictures, so I formed a company. I literally thought the telephone would ring and people would say "I want two feature films, when can you deliver them?" But of course this didn't happen. Then, one day, just as our money had almost run out, a lady called Roberta Lee, who had been involved in children's television for some time, came to us and said "I've written 52 episodes of a show called *The Adventures of Twizzle*. Would you mind making these into 15 minute shows for £450 each?" and we snapped at the chance. I've always said that if the question had been "Would you make this documentary about crocodiles?" then today I'd be the foremost producer of crocodile pictures!'

Anderson hated the idea of puppet movies at the start: 'All those papier mâché dolls bobbing up and down in front of painted backgrounds! But the series was a big success and then Roberta Lee hired us again to do *Torchy*, *The Battery Boy*, and I began to see that what was emerging had the potential to be a respectable type of film. There came a point at which we contrived to make the puppet film look as near to real life as we could, just to prove to people that we could make a respectable feature film if given the opportunity. But instead they just said "Aren't this guy's puppet films great?" — and I got stuck with them!'

Resigned to his fate, Anderson sunk his profits from *Twizzle* and *Torchy* into the pilot episode for a half hour western



Terrahawks... skin-care by Domestos: Hair by Flymo.

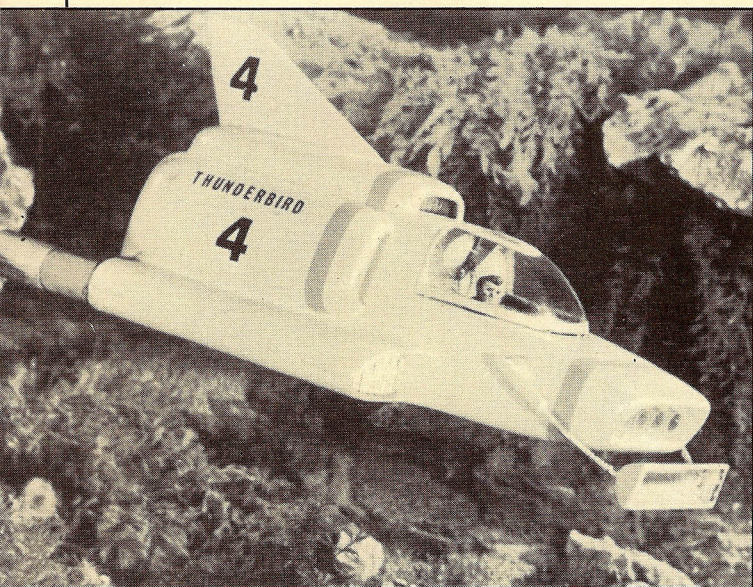
puppet show entitled *Four Feather Falls*, which featured the voice of Nicholas Parsons! 'This was bought by Granada in 1960 and turned out to be another hit. But strangely Granada didn't come back to us after that for any more. They just said "thank you very much and goodbye!"' This meant that we were stuck with a property we had been developing called *Supercar*. But then Lew Grade came along and took a look at it and asked us to make 26 episodes for ATV. Then came *Fireball XL5*, and Lew was so pleased with our product that, rather like the man from Remington razors, he bought the company!"

Now with considerable backing from ATV, Anderson's puppet empire went from strength to strength, notching up a

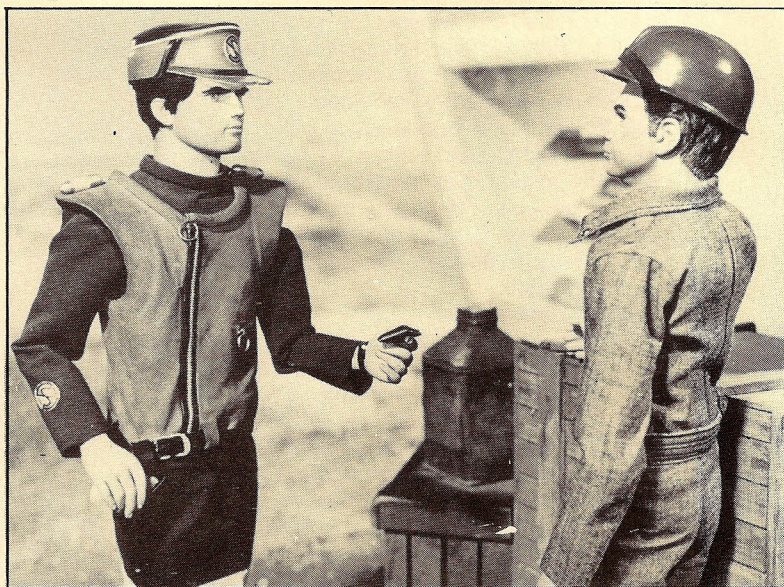
suitable for the States.'

Whatever Anderson's recipe, it certainly proved a success with *Thunderbirds*, the first of his shows to last a full hour. 'In fact it started out at thirty minutes,' he says. But after we had made the first nine episodes Lew Grade decided that we should pad them out to an hour long, which enabled the stories to be much more highly developed than before. The adventures of the Tracey family international Rescue team, Parker, Lady Penelope and, of course Brains, became Anderson's biggest hit to date. 'It was a phenomenal success,' he notes. 'It was every British producer's dream at the time to get his show on one of the three American networks, and when *Thunderbirds* was taken to the States every one of

How much does it cost to make a puppet? Anderson smiles. 'People often ask that. If you were to make a replica of one of our existing puppets then you would be talking about three or four thousand pounds. But the very first one, which involves drawing, revised drawing, sculpting, testing and modification could cost many thousands. You just can't put a price on it. But of course once a puppet is made there will be no problems with increased salary demands from the stars as a series becomes more successful, which is why Anderson likes to make his shows in large batches. 'Let's take an imaginary script as an example,' he says. 'A man drives up to a hotel, gets out of his car, goes through the swing doors and checks in his baggage. If you are doing



Fun-derbird 4... bath-time has never been such fun



'Beam me up Scottie... sorry, wrong show'

number of television 'firsts' in the process. *Fireball XL5* was actually the first English film series to be shown on an American network, while Anderson's next show, *Stingray* was the first English series shot in colour. 'We did this for two reasons,' he explains. 'One was for the American market, and the other for its library value in the future.' So intent was he on capturing a slice of the lucrative Stateside market that he deliberately gave the shows an American feel, to the extent of using American voices and spelling (read the credits and you would see the shows were in color, rather than in colour!) He defends his motives this way: 'It's rather like a Spanish guy coming over to England and saying "We have made a police show which is absolutely fantastic and we have copied the English backgrounds and have got English speaking artists..." We would just yawn, and say "You've got to be kidding!" So we tried to overcome this by making shows whose very premise was American. For instance, if it was anything to do with space technology I felt wholly justified in saying it would be the Americans — or the Russians — behind it. I like to think we produced believable shows that were suitable for American, not English subjects twisted and distorted to make them more

them wanted to buy it. The problem is that Lew Grade insisted it be aired at 8.30 at night, which is really Prime Time, and consequently was up against stiff opposition. I think it was a mistake to put it on so late, because although it got good ratings, it missed its opportunity to become another *Star Trek*.'

Thunderbirds was a long way from *Twizzle* and *Torchy* in its sophisticated use of puppetry and special effects techniques, and by now Anderson had coined a new description for his work: 'I began to call it "Supermarionation" — which comes of course from marionette — because, with all due respect, puppet films at that time were mainly *Bill and Ben*, *The Flowerpot Men*, and *Muffin The Mule* jumping up and down on a piano. If I said puppet film it didn't really create the impression of the type of film we were making. They were now becoming quite expensive and we were using lots of special effects. Our puppets had progressed from having papier mâché bodies with fixed mouths, fixed eyes and carpet threads, to having bodies that were made out of wood, heads that were fibre glass shells, and eyes and mouths that moved. Nowadays of course we are into radio-controlled prosthetics and full size characters.'

that scene in live action then you hire a car, find the hotel, take a few lights along with you and shoot it. However, if you take the same script with puppets then we actually have to make the street, make the car, the inside of the car and the character, the hotel interior and the receptionist; every single thing that goes on the screen — including the sky. So it usually takes us about six months to build and prepare a series, and if we only make one then the entire cost is attributed to that single episode. The more we do the cheaper it becomes.'

Without wishing to appear too ignorant (or rude), I ask exactly what it is that Mr Anderson himself contributes to each series. 'That's a perfectly reasonable question,' he smiles. 'I don't think there is another one like me and it is not easy to describe my job. Generally speaking you have a film based on a book or a writer who comes in to create a show. Then you have Mr Moneybags the producer, who organises things. Well I am all of these and more, because I follow a show through from the germ of an idea right to its completion. I always write the first script which sets up the basic premise and then I supervise every stage of the production. And this is not to say I want to take all the credit for everything we do. I

work with very clever people: sculptors, puppet makers, artists, art directors and special effects men. They all make their contribution. I think to sum it up I would say I am the guy who recognises and selects the talent, turns them into a big orchestra and then conducts!

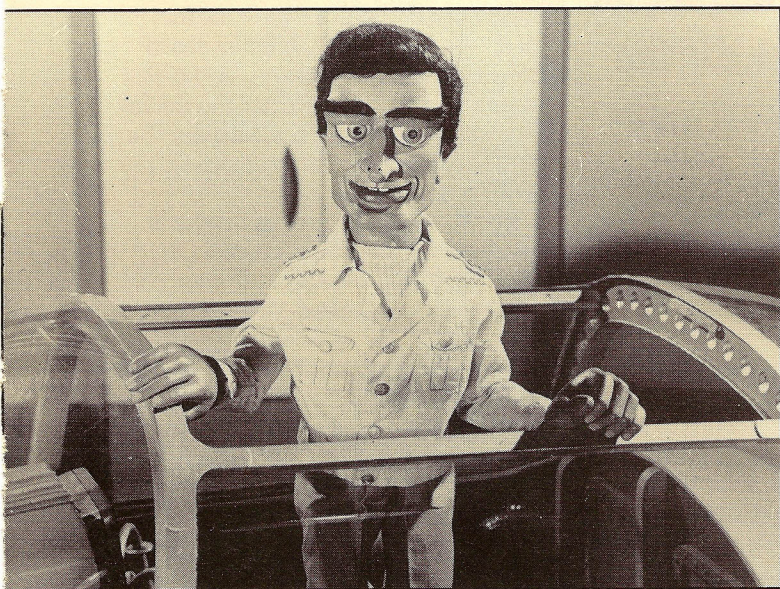
If that's the case then Anderson's most successful symphony to date must be *Thunderbirds*, which stretched to an astronomical 32 episodes, and then hit the movie screen in two feature films called *Thunderbirds Are Go* and *Thunderbird 6*, both of which did extremely well. I remembered the former featured a guest appearance from pop idol Cliff Richard and his famous backing group The Shadows — or rather their puppets! How did that come about? 'Obviously we asked

a time when science-fiction movies weren't supposed to do that.'

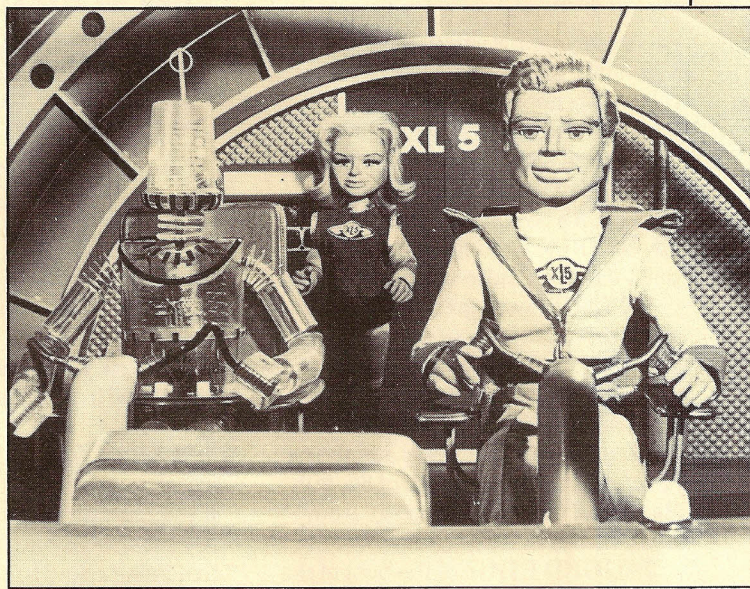
So it was back to puppets for a while, and more hit programmes like *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons*, and *Joe 90*. Then, as a favour to Lew Grade, Anderson produced his only non-fantasy show, *The Protectors*, with Robert Vaughan and Nyree Dawn Porter, and he stayed with live action for *U.F.O.* and *Space 1999*, two science-fiction shows that weren't hugely popular at the time but have since managed to build up a considerable cult following. In fact much of Anderson's output looks better in retrospect, and has a durability that makes it a natural choice for modern day video release. Channel 5 recently put out the *Thunderbirds* episode *Countdown To Disaster* and it shot

ing around — but as we talk, Anderson is right in the middle of an ambitious new live-action show with a science-fiction slant. 'I can't tell you too much about it at the moment, other than it's called *Space Police*', he says. 'And deals with an American policeman who is posted out to a space station, which is a parody of the sort of police precinct house you get in New York: all peeling grey paint, mountains of paperwork, and nutty people. The police force are mainly aliens. The police cars are spaceships. It's a very different show!'

Totally funded by Anderson himself and his *Terrahawks* partner Christopher Burr, the hour long pilot episode has been shooting at Bray for the past seven weeks, and has another five to go. Then



And I tell you... some of us have them this long.



Fireball XL5... built by Anderson... driven by robots.

Cliff for his permission,' smiles Gerry, 'and got him to write us a special song for the production. Then we made the group as puppets and staged quite a big number. The interesting thing was that when we had the première at Tottenham Court Road, the first time the puppet of Cliff appeared on the screen a girl fan in the balcony couldn't contain herself and screamed out loud. The entire cinema just collapsed into laughter to think that even his puppet effigy could produce this reaction!'

In the early 70s Anderson turned his hand toward producing a live action science-fiction feature entitled *Journey To the Far Side of the Sun*, using his special effects expertise to embroider an unusual tale of an astronaut (Roy Thinnes) who returns from a deep space voyage to find he has landed on a mirror image of Earth where the inhabitants act very differently. 'I'd always wanted to do a live action feature, and the notion of the script was such an intriguing one that I felt this was a good opportunity. Unfortunately it was not a commercial success at the time, although now it is shown regularly on British and American television and at science-fiction conventions, and I get a lot of favourable comment on it. I think the problem was that it took itself seriously at

to the top of the sales charts overnight. But as with everything else he produced for ATV, Anderson will not see a penny in royalties. 'I was hired and paid pretty well,' he says philosophically. 'There's no point in complaining.'

The only one of his shows that he does own lock, stock and barrel is the latest one, *Terrahawks*, 26 episodes of which were made a couple of years ago. It wasn't the success of *Thunderbirds*, he admits. 'But on a worldwide scale it has probably done as well as, say, *Stingray*.' One of the most popular characters in the show was undoubtedly the chief of the Zeroids — a race of small circular silver balls — whose speech was provided by Windsor (Never The Twain...) Davies. This leads me to enquire how Anderson chooses the voices for his characters. 'We go out into the market place and audition. I don't think we have any preconceived notion about anything really. We have the puppet made and then we get twenty or so people to struggle to produce a voice for it. When we get the voice we feel is right, we then see the character emerge and the writers can get to work.'

Lately he has been involved in producing award-winning commercials — like the one for the Royal Bank of Scotland with little animated bronze figures walk-

ing around — but as we talk, Anderson is right in the middle of an ambitious new live-action show with a science-fiction slant. 'I can't tell you too much about it at the moment, other than it's called *Space Police*', he says. 'And deals with an American policeman who is posted out to a space station, which is a parody of the sort of police precinct house you get in New York: all peeling grey paint, mountains of paperwork, and nutty people. The police force are mainly aliens. The police cars are spaceships. It's a very different show!'

Finally, I ask him something that has always intrigued me about Gerry Anderson shows. What happens to the likes of Steve Zodiac, Mike Mercury, and all the rest of his puppet heroes after the cameras have stopped turning? 'It's the same as any other cinema or television production I'm afraid. There's never enough room in the set store to keep everything. Yesterday I went to the set store on *Terrahawks* because we needed room for *Space Police* equipment, and I found myself saying "Look, we're not going to need that again and we don't want to cart it away so we had better burn it. It happens on all productions, and of course if ten years later the thing happens to be a success then these items often turn out to be very valuable and you wish you have kept them — but at the time all you want to do is make space for the next production.'

So the ultimate irony is that after having survived innumerable perils from every corner of the galaxy, Gerry Anderson's creations often end up in the dustbin. It certainly seems like a job for International Rescue to me!